

**House Education Committee Public Testimony
HB 5619, HB 5620**

By Emilia Askari -- parent, school volunteer and doctoral student in Educational Psychology and Educational Technology at Michigan State University

As a parent who has had a very direct, emotional experience with the need for restorative practices in schools, and also as a doctoral student in education, I strongly support HB 5619 and HB 5620.

Lifelong damage when principal at top public high school rejected restoration

When my son was a junior at one of the best public high schools in the state, two classmates created a fake social media account in my son's name. The classmates made hundreds of racist, homophobic, sexist posts pretending to be my son. This fake account was followed by one-third of the students in my son's grade.

I begged school administrators to take a restorative approach to this situation. I sought discussion among the boys involved, likely leading to an online apology from the classmates who made the offensive posts. The principal refused, instead suspending the two classmates who impersonated my son. This further damaged my son's social relationships, needlessly took the two classmates out of class for a few days, squandered a teachable moment for the entire school community, and failed to correct the public record about who made the offensive in my son's name.

The social media platform chosen by the impersonators is such an important public record that it is archived by the Library of Congress. Those offensive posts will follow my son for the rest of his life and beyond, damaging his reputation even after his death. In this age of Big Data, we know that this most public social media platform also is archived by hundreds of private data brokers who will mistakenly profile my son as racist, homophobic and misogynistic.

My son, who recently completed his first year at a Michigan university, is a good student interested in economics and diplomacy. He is a youth leader in an international nonprofit focused on global peace through intercultural understanding and friendship. The father of one of the impersonators told me that the offensive posts were funny because "everyone" knows my son doesn't talk that way.

Principal prioritized her own reputation over restoration and teachable moment

This emotionally brutal episode clouded my son's last two years of high school, damaging his friendships just at the moment when friends are most important. Much of this damage could have been avoided if the principal had agreed to my multiple requests that she embrace the trend toward restorative practices in schools. I believe that this principal rejected my pleas because she cared more about protecting her own reputation than about helping the three boys at the center of this situation or drawing lessons from it for the rest of her students. This principal's personal agenda was to keep this incident quiet so she could continue to talk about how the high-scoring students at her school are "different" from their peers. In fact, conflicts involving social media are increasingly common at every school, stealing ever more time from administrators. In my opinion, restorative practices are the ideal educational response to this problem.

Emails show principal ignored state Board of Education recommendations

The current state Board of Education model policies encouraging administrators to consider restorative practices are not enough. They can be ignored by administrators, such as the principal of my son's school. I gave this principal the link to the state Board of Education's model codes and other resources recommending restorative practices. I told this principal that she could come out of this situation looking smart for embracing a new approach to conflict in schools. She didn't care.

On Oct 16, 2014 I wrote: "It is not too late to try restorative justice in this case. It would not be a double jeopardy situation where the school would be imposing a second punishment on xxx and xxx. Requiring those boys to talk with (my son) and a facilitator is not punishment...As I have pointed out, in Michigan the state Board of Education has recommended restorative justice practices in its 2010 model anti-bullying policy and in its 2014 model school discipline policy....I repeat that the ACLU and others are willing to lead the sessions with these boys and demonstrate how restorative justice could work in this case."

On Oct 17, 2014 the principal responded in part: "Discipline was imposed on the two students in January, 2014. We will not be implementing a Restorative Justice program at this time. Nor will we be taking any further action on the incident that began in September, 2013."

Nearly two years later, the school has taken tentative steps towards considering restorative practices. I believe that three associate principals have been trained in implementation of restorative practices. Yet, the school's student code of conduct does not state that restorative practices will be offered. There has been no effort to educate parents about nontraditional approaches to discipline. Just last month, I invited the principal to have a restorative conversation with me so we could work together with others to improve her wonderful school. The principal declined, saying that she doesn't need anyone to tell her how to run her school.

Potential to improve all schools, not just those with high poverty, crime & dropout rates

Restorative practices were developed in a criminal justice context, as an alternative to incarceration. The first schools to adopt restorative practices in this country were in high crime, high poverty neighborhoods where a traditional suspensions could lead students to drop out, lose hope of finding a decent job, and wind up in prison. My experience demonstrates that restorative practices can benefit students in all schools.

I refrain from naming my son's school or its principal because it is not my intention to punish or embarrass her. I truly would like to engage in a restorative process with her in the future. Yet, I cannot remain silent and allow this principal to potentially hurt other families the way she hurt ours when she rejected my requests for restorative practices. In addition, I know it's possible that other principals around the state may also be rejecting restorative practice at their convenience, even when parents request restoration.

My studies in the doctoral program at MSU's top-ranked College of Education have required me to take a sober, hard-nosed look at what it means to mandate such things as how schools should approach disciplinary problems. I am aware of the challenges that legislators face in creating and implementing effective school policies. Nevertheless, I believe that there are situations when change will only take hold if it is mandated. This is one of those situations. Without the legislation you are currently considering, more principals may reject restorative practices at their convenience, flying in the face of parental wishes, state recommendations and academic research. I urge you to draw lessons from my experience and pass the package of bills before you today. Thank you for your work on this important issue.

Resources

<http://www.edutopia.org/blog/restorative-justice-resources-matt-davis>

<http://mobile.nytimes.com/2013/04/04/education/restorative-justice-programs-take-root-in-schools.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

<http://restorativejustice.com/>